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Indexing

Abstracting

SELF-DETERMINATION AND POWER: A HUMAN-CENTRIC APPROACH TO THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the importance of self-determination in international relations. It explains the puzzle why some small regions or group of people are ready to be small states by separating from big powerful states. The self-determination of a nation is preferable to the people than a military power of the large state. The military power of a state may not translate into a better life of people. So people's empowerment cannot be treated the necessary outcome of state's military power. When one group of people feel as marginalized in national policymaking and its implications, they show a secessionist tendency. This paper contends that people may prefer their ideology, identity and self-determination than the power of the state.

Key words: Identity Politics; International Relations; Power; Secessionist Movements; Self-Determination

INTRODUCTION

Self-determination and secessionist tendency of smaller territory from the powerful state have increased after the cold war. Since the conventional theories take states as granted, they do not analyze this secessionist tendency of people. As per conventional wisdom of realism, power is necessary for every state for ensuring their survival in the international system. States increase their power either by increasing their own military capability or by allying with any other powerful country. But, since today's ally may be tomorrow's enemy, self-help is an only proper way for survival in the international system. For Mearsheimer, the alliance is a temporary marriage" (Mearsheimer 2001, 30). These assumptions of the realism arise many questions regarding secessionist movements.

Because, even though to be part of a family of the big state is not a “temporary marriage” but a permanent membership, still secessionist movements prefer small sovereign state. An analysis of secessionist movements in a different part of the world, for example, Kashmir and Quebec, reveal that people are aware that their state would be a “weaker one” if they separated from existing state. But still, they prefer separate state and self-determination rather than a military power of the state. This attitude of people questions the traditional notion of “national interest which is defined in terms of power”.

This paper analyzes why some states or group of people prefer self-determination rather than power. The first part of the paper will outline the meanings of self-determination and power. It will describe different opinions on the legitimacy of secessionist movements and rights of people for self-determination. Then, it will describe the importance of the concept of “self-determination” in international relations. It will analyze the reasons behind the neglecting of this idea from the mainstream literature of IR. Then this paper will present a people-centric view to understanding how a new nation born and the motivations of people to cooperate or to conflict in a nation building process. Then it looks what is the more important factor for self-determination and nation building whether it is power, identity, prosperity or anything else. It will analyze different historical and contemporary examples. Finally it concludes by taking “identity” as an independent variable and self-determination tendency as a dependent variable. It will consider many other intervening variables also.

POWER AND SELF-DETERMINATION: A CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

According to realist understanding, power is seen as equal to force or military power (Waltz 1954). Some neorealist scholars like Alfred F. K Organski (1968) have defined power as “possession”. According to both of these definitions of neorealists, which consider power in the distributional structural term, each state should try to increase its share in this structural distribution. But this definition of power cannot answer the question why some states prefer to be smaller one and autonomy rather than become part of powerful states. This concept of power fails to explain the emergence of small states after cold war separated from other countries. So the concept of self-determination seems to be relevant here. The neorealist concept of power does not relate with the empowerment of people and their welfare. In some occasions, increasing the military capability of a state may affect negatively empowerment of individuals.

On another hand, a nation’s inherent right to decide its destiny is one of the most common and recurring notions in the definitions of self-determination. Franck provides a slightly expanded version of this idea when he defines self-determination as the “right of people organized in an established territory to determine its collective political destiny in a democratic fashion” (Franck 1991, 52). Many scholars see self-determination just as a separate independent state while some other scholars consider democracy as important criteria for ensuring self-determination. Another viewpoint is to define nationalism and self-determination in cultural view point. According to this understanding, the self-determination means to get autonomy for practicing and protecting a group’s culture. According to Anaya, “self-determination may be understood as a right of the cultural groupings to political institutions that are necessary to allow them to exist and develop according to their distinct characteristics” (Anaya 1990, 842).

In the issue of legitimacy and rights of self-determination also scholars belong to different schools. Liberal schools justify self-determination because of its positive impact on individuals. Romantic nationalist theorists justify in the name of the greatness of a nation and see self-determination as prestige for it. So according to them, individual is not much important. Marxists see nationalism and self-determination have impacted negatively main goal of proletariat revolution. The support for self-determination may end in support for a dominant class of the society. Marxist believed complete self-determination could be achieved only through the socialist system.

The development after Second World War promoted self-determination of the states. UN General Assembly 15th Special Session (1960) adopted a resolution saying “All people have the right to self-determination, by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development”. International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted by the General Assembly on 16 December 1966) reaffirmed this right to self-determination.

But the concept or right to self-determination was not extended beyond colonized countries. A general notion of leaders and mainstream academicians is to keep existing international boundaries as boundaries forever. Before 1990, only Bangladesh was the successful case for self-determination. Many countries made a reservation in their adopting International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights on the issue self-determination. According to Buchanan (1991) and Birch (1984), there is no basic right for self-determination. Secession is allowed only in response to the injustice of the central government and due to the lack of representation in the government. So in a democratic state, people have no right to choose the secessionist way. Scholars like Donald L. Horowitz (1988) considered secessionism as an undesirable way. He suggested it would lead to problems of the minority in new states and ethnic cleanings.

Some scholars like Harry Beran (1984) and Daniel Philpott justify secession arguing that if the majority of the population wish to secede, they should have the right to do so. This approach, known as a choice or primary right theory, is based on liberal ideas of autonomy, free association, and consent. Although this approach is supporting secession, it is only with some conditions: 1) support of the majority and 2) assurance of human rights of the minority in the new state. Another viewpoint is to allow secession if it is based on different “nation identity”. David Miller (1988), proposed this viewpoint in his work “Secession and the Principle of Nationality”.

The main problem in defining self-determination and to analyzing its legitimacy and consequences is the difficulty of the defining “self”. What does constitute self? Is it a group of people with particular identity? If it so what is the basis of identity? Is it an ethnic group? Religion? Region or language? The difficulty in understanding self-determination is each person may have a different identity. So, this paper prefers to choose each identity as independent variables. But, many intervening variables are necessary to translate these identities to a dependent variable that is self-determination. The feeling of discrimination and mobilization by any leader are considered as an intervening variable to strengthen the separate identity (nationalist) feeling and to mobilize for self-determination.

Why self-determination?

These questions need at least two set of answers: First one, why state/ group of people choose self-determination even by avoiding the possibility of to be part of the powerful state. Is it just an emotional expression of identity against the rational choice of power? Or is it a way for self-empowerment and prosperity by the small representative state against continues ignorant of government of powerful state?. The second question is that why does this paper consider self-determination so seriously than traditional state and power-centric approach?


People prefer self-determination for different motivations such as identity, discrimination against particular region, separate historical background, lack of representation in the government and personal interest of certain individual to get power through creating separate state. It leads to a new question that which is more important to people? Is it power or identity or anything else? Realists give too much importance to power. But the experiences of dismemberment of USSR and secessionist tendency in Kashmir suggest that states' power may not translate into increasing loyalty among people or improving their life and prosperity. The nuclear weapon of a state may not lead to better life or security of common people. Even though the USSR was a great power in the world during the cold war, it was not translated into the feeling of "greatness" among common people especially those lives outside of Russia. The people in Xinjiang of China or Quebec of Canada do not consider themselves as part of the strength of their state at international level. The examples of China (Xinjiang), Canada (Quebec), Sri Lanka (Tamils), USSR (CIS States), UK (Irish) and anti-colonial freedom struggles suggest that the mobilization for self-determination happen throughout the world whether it is First, Second or Third World. It occurs in both developed and developing countries and both great and small powers. In some cases, this struggle happens in the name of certain identity: ethnic, linguistic, regional or religious identity. In some cases, certain identity overweighs another identity that was the base for state creation before. For example, Pakistan separated from India in 1947 and religious identity of Islam was the base for integrating people in the nation building. But in 1971, Pakistan was divided, and Bangladesh was created based on ethnic identity. In some pluralist countries, people with different identities are living together without secessionist tendency. For example, India, which can be theoretically divided into hundreds of nations, still continues with diverse identities. Even though there are different separatist movements, most of the movements are ready to live in India, and many identities do not show a secessionist tendency.

So even though, identity is the basis for self-determination, it alone does not lead to secessionist tendency and aspiration for self-determination. Many intervening factors are important in the outcome. An external factor like discriminative policies of government acts as one of the intervening variables. Some leaders may be necessary for strengthening the certain identity of people and mobilizing them to the goal of self-determination. The leaders may use these discriminative or oppressive policies of central government to get certain personal interests. However, they mobilize people mainly based on their identity. Even though the identity is used to mobilize people, but many times strengthening the glory of "nation" is not an end, but a mean to get self-determination and individual prosperity and empowerment. So in some occasion, single identity group may separate into different states. For example, GCC countries belong to single identity in their religion (Islam), sect

(Sunni), language (Arabic) and ethnicity (Arab). But still, they prefer to be a separate state. It shows self-determination is preferable to people more than their identity also.

So the role of “self-determination” is important than the power of state or identity of a nation. People prefer it as a way for self-empowerment and prosperity that is not necessarily available through the state military power. The concept of “self-determination” is important to understand why the people show secessionist tendency when the states’ power gradually declines in this globalized world system. It gives an answer to the second question that why the self-determination is so significant than traditional state and power-centric approach.

CONCLUSION

The concept of “self-determination” is very useful to understand the secessionist tendency of people. The military power of the state is not nor the primary object of the people. They want their own prosperity and empowerment. When the power of the state is not translated into the empowerment of the people, they prefer their own empowerment and identity rather than state’s power. State’s power in military terms is seen as an interest of some minority elite class. People feel as “alienated” from the government policy and interpret it as marginalization of a particular identity. The intervening factors like discriminative policies of government and mobilization by leaders translate independent variable of identity to dependent variable, which is self-determination. 

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